

---

## Indian workers in Dubai: City, Fear and Belongingness

---

*Abhijit Ray* teaches media studies at Salesian College, Siliguri.

### Abstract

Even though the pandemic is portrayed in the popular narrative as a collective experience of humankind, it affected different sections of people of different spectrums indifferent ways across the world. The workers from India and other south Asian countries are living in the megacities like Dubai in the Gulf region for generations. The outbreak of the pandemic suddenly shuttered the economic arrangement of the workers carefully designed by the host and home countries over the decades. The article has mainly focused on two contradictory human experience— belongingness and fear in the context of Indian workers working in Dubai during the pandemic. In this particular time, the eagerness for ‘going back home’ was driven by these two seemingly contradictory human emotions. The focus is entirely on Dubai— which is considered by many Indians as an extended part of India. The article points out that the pandemic magnified certain aspects of the workers working in Dubai that often remain invisible in the popular public domain. The pandemic suddenly exposed the vulnerability of the workers living in foreign cities. There are chances that the pandemic experience will have a long-lasting impact on the life of the workers and the whole economic and political arrangement of the city like Dubai.

---

**Keywords:** Fear, Dubai, belongingness, pandemic, lockdown, laborers.

---

### Introduction

The exodus of Indian migrant workers from the cities of India during the Covid-19 pandemic ‘lockdown’ caused a public uproar, fear, pain, empathy and anger at the same time. The fear and the insecurities of the workers were suddenly revealed and became visible to the public eye. A large section of Indian workers is also working in foreign cities – particularly in the Middle East or the Gulf region. Their existential situation is as vulnerable as the workers of

the home country – even though it may be argued that the nature of the vulnerability differs between these two categories of migrant workers. Mainly economic factors encouraged the mass migration of labourers to the Gulf region from India, but it's a temporary arrangement for them. The state narrative of the host countries defines them as 'outsiders'. Social and political acceptance is never possible for an 'outsider'. The culture of fear and suspicion for each other never encourage a sense of belongingness and comfort. However, the vulnerability, the fear and the insecurities of the Indian workers in the foreign land did not appear prominently in the public view during the pandemic. So, the paper is an effort to focus on the certain emotional and intuitive human experience of a section of people that remained invisible during the pandemic. The study focuses on the workers of Dubai – the city which is often considered as an 'extended part of India'<sup>1</sup> in the Arab world by many. Human emotions – like fear and the feeling of belongingness are discussed in the paper in the context of the city and the Indian workers to explore the collective psyche of the migrant labourers during the pandemic. It assumes that the pandemic situation has magnified some of the hidden factors connecting the Indian working class in foreign cities. Indian workers in the Gulf region are great contributors to the economy of the country, but their issues are often ignored and remain invisible from the popular public domain.

### Working in Dubai

The Gulf region is highly dependent on migrant labourers. The number of migrants from South Asian countries is pre-dominant in the entire Gulf region. They are working in different sectors. The number of Indian workers is visibly dominant in countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia or Qatar. India is the largest suppliers of the labour force in the UAE.<sup>2</sup> Dubai is a major city of UAE, and the number of Indians working in Dubai is predominant. According to

<sup>1</sup> David Sancho, "Exposed to Dubai: education and belonging among young Indian residents in the Gulf", *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 18, 3(2020): 277-289.

<sup>2</sup> Arabinda Acharya, "COVID-19: A Testing Time for UAE-India Relations? A Perspective from Abu Dhabi", *Strategic Analysis* 44, 3(2020): 259-268.

estimates, before the Covid-19 pandemic, 17.5 million Indians were living in UAE<sup>3</sup> and a majority of them were concentrated in Dubai. Approximately, 51 per cent of the total population of Dubai was from India.<sup>4</sup> The Emirati citizens constituted just 15 percent of the total population of the city.<sup>5</sup>

Dubai has been an important destination for Indians for centuries. According to Andrew Gardner, there were three phases of Indian migration in Dubai.<sup>6</sup> The Indian merchant class was in Dubai before the British rule in India. During the colonial rule, Dubai was the western entrepôt to the Indian mainland.<sup>7</sup> So, historically Indians maintained a close tie with Dubai. A lot of Indians lived in Dubai before it actually became an international business hub. However, the mass inflow of Indian workers started in Dubai during the 1960s<sup>8</sup> and 1970s.<sup>9</sup> The oil economy boom and the expansion of real estate caused the demand for labourers in the entire Gulf region. Workers from the neighbouring Arab countries also migrated to Dubai in that period. However, the Dubai authority was suspicious about the Arab workers for the rise of Arab nationalism<sup>10</sup> and the consequent movements. So, they shifted their concentration to the

<sup>3</sup> Sharmila Dhal, "Indians largest group of expats in UAE", *Gulf News*, Dubai, 18 September 2019. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/indians-largest-group-of-expats-in-uae-1.66500784>

<sup>4</sup> Data collected from World Population Review Website Link: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/dubai-population>

<sup>5</sup> World Population Review Website Data, Link: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/dubai-population>

<sup>6</sup> Christiane Schlote, "Writing Dubai: Indian labour migrants and taxi topographies", *South Asian Diaspora* 6, 1 (2014): 33-46.

<sup>7</sup> Arabinda Acharya, "COVID-19: A Testing Time for UAE-India Relations? A Perspective from Abu Dhabi", *Strategic Analysis* 44, 3(2020): 259-268.

<sup>8</sup> Christiane Schlote, "Writing Dubai: Indian labour migrants and taxi topographies", *South Asian Diaspora* 6, 1 (2014): 33-46, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Arabinda Acharya, "COVID-19: A Testing Time for UAE-India Relations? A Perspective from Abu Dhabi", *Strategic Analysis* 44, 3(2020): 259-268

<sup>10</sup> Idil Akinci, "Culture in the 'politics of identity': conceptions of national identity and citizenship among second generation non-Gulf Arab migrants in Dubai", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, 11 (2019): 1-17, 2.

South Asian region seeking cheap labour from the region. Cultural and religious proximity was one of the reasons for selecting South Asian labourers—particularly—religion was a prime factor for selecting South Asian labourers.<sup>11</sup> Like the other economic aspects of the city, the authority of Dubai is very concerned, selective and calculative about the laborers working in the city.

### **Future vs. Futuristic**

The rulers of Dubai successfully planned and prepared to secure their economy for the future during the oil economy boom. They were aware of their limited oil reserve. So, they invested their oil money in different sectors and diversified the economy. Currently, only 2 per cent (approximately) of the GDP of Dubai comes from oil, and the rest comes from non-oil sectors.<sup>12</sup>

The popular quote from Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, “[my] grandfather rode a camel, my father rode a camel, I drive a Mercedes, my son drives a Land Rover, his son will drive a Land Rover, but his son will ride a camel”<sup>13</sup> explicates a concern connected with the ‘future’ of the city. The futuristic approach of the rulers of the city is visible everywhere in Dubai. In this context, Kathiravelu mentioned about an ‘air-conditioned bus stand’ in Dubai.<sup>14</sup> The air-conditioned bus stand is the ‘first air-conditioned bus stand in the world’ and it’s a statement regarding the city underlined by this ‘futuristic approach’. Dubai is often termed as a ‘futuristic’ city. Dubai is a ‘dream world’ for the neoliberal economy. It’s a tax-free

<sup>11</sup> Christiane Schlote, “Writing Dubai: Indian labour migrants and taxi topographies”, *South Asian Diaspora* 6, 1 (2014): 33-46, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony DiPaola, “Dubai Gets 2% GDP From Oil After Diversifying Revenue Sources”, *Bloomberg News*, New York, 28 September 2010. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2010-09-28/dubai-gets-2-gdp-from-oil-after-diversifying-revenue-prospectus-shows>

<sup>13</sup> Varsha John, “Youth must pay heed to our leader’s advice”, *The National*, Abu Dhabi, 12 March 2017. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/youth-must-pay-heed-to-our-leader-s-advice-1.62743>

<sup>14</sup> Laavanya Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 43.

'heaven' for business. The architecture of the city also carries the vibe of the futuristic approach. Benjamin Smith even predicted that eventually, Dubai might be the collective future of everyone.<sup>15</sup>

However, the futuristic 'vision' of the city is not appreciable for many. Mark Davis strongly expressed his scepticism regarding the 'futuristic' characteristic of the city.<sup>16</sup> The 'futuristic' Dubai is not desirable but scary for him.

The recent pandemic and the worldwide lockdown, in another way, support the sceptical view regarding the 'futuristic enthusiasm'. The unpredictability and the catastrophic crisis caused by the pandemic is a question mark for the over-enthusiasm for 'being futuristic'. The pandemic crisis indicate that the 'futuristic' is just an adjective to define a particular dimension of 'present'. The 'future' is, like always been, unpredictable and unknown.

The 'futuristic imagination' inspired not only the city but also the migration to the city from different parts of the world. People from different corners of the world, including India, migrated to Dubai in search of a 'better future'. In this context, Akbar Ahmed wrote about the Pakistani experience:

The saying Dubai *Chalo*, "let us go to Dubai" - which is the equivalent of the expression "Westward ho" in Western tradition, has become part of Pakistani culture (popular Pakistani films around this theme are "Dubai *Chalo*" in Urdu and "Visa Dubai *da*" - "visa for Dubai" - in Punjabi. It signifies the possibility of gathering relatively quick, legitimate, and a great deal of wealth in the Arab states.<sup>17</sup>

This Pakistani phenomenon is also applicable to other parts of the South Asian countries, including India. The 'possibility' of a brighter 'future' is so dominant that it covers up the defensive psyche of fear and other insecurities. However, the pandemic and

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Smith, "Scared by, of, in, and for Dubai", *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, 3 (2010): 263-283, 264.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>17</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, "Dubai chalo: Problems in the ethnic encounter between Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim societies", *Asian Affairs* 15, 3(1984): 262-276.

the lockdown suddenly opened Pandora's Box. The pressure of 'closed doors' opened up the suppressed emotions and insecurities covered up for years.

## **To Belong**

The idea of 'belongingness' may convey a very subjective and complex emotional meaning at the psychological level. It might be an absurd concept. However, the dominant liberal notion of the contemporary political scenario defines belongingness in terms of citizenship, cultural assimilation and equal rights.<sup>18</sup>In every aspect, the idea of belongingness among the class of migrant workers in Dubai is either superficial or absent most of the time.

The cosmopolitanism of Dubai is very unique. Multiple ethnic, linguistic, religious and 'racial' groups are living 'together' in the city for decades. Multiculturalism is a defining characteristic of the city from a macro perspective. However, multiculturalism in Dubai is just an economic arrangement. Many migrant workers from India and other South Asian countries are working in the city for generations. But, they cannot expect to become a citizen of the country. The citizenship for an 'outsider' is near to impossible for the 'futuristic' city – Dubai. The authority is tolerant towards different cultures until they maintain the 'distance'. Cultural 'co-existence' for economic purposes is acceptable for the city, but cultural assimilation is fanatically restricted by the authority. The authority is very successful for creating a space that separates the 'other' from the 'owners' of the city. The 'other' can fulfill their economic necessities without proper physical and cultural assimilation. As Julian Bolleter explained:

Dubai has successfully created spaces for diverging cultural groups without requiring significant assimilation. The separation of ethnic groups along economic lines while allowing for a 'functioning' multicultural society, also creates conditions in which segments of

<sup>18</sup> Idil Akinci, "Culture in the 'politics of identity': conceptions of national identity and citizenship among second generation non-Gulf Arab migrants in Dubai", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46,11 (2019): 1-17, 2.

the society become 'othered' when viewed from the perspective of the dominant strata of Dubai society.<sup>19</sup>

They have formulated certain legal procedures from the tribal tradition of the region just to keep away the 'other' from the natural process of political and cultural assimilation. The *Kafala* system is still prevalent in the Gulf region. The *Kafala* system is a 'sponsorship' system of labourers and it started in the Arab region during the 1950s to support the working force of the booming economy of the region.<sup>20</sup> ILO (International Labor Organization) explains the *Kafala* system in the following way:

Under the *Kafala* system, a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (*kafeel*) for their contract period. The migrant worker cannot enter the country, transfer employment nor leave the country for any reason without first obtaining explicit written permission from the *kafeel*...This situates the migrant worker as completely dependent upon their *kafeel* for their livelihood and residency.<sup>21</sup>

ILO further pointed out that the *Kafala* system is designed to restrict the workers from providing citizenship. It is a system that assists the authority to get the workforce without obligations. ILO mentioned, "The *Kafala* system serves a social purpose by emphasizing the temporary nature of a migrant workers presence in the country, so that even if the worker is present for a long time s/he doesn't acquire the rights of citizenship."<sup>22</sup>

The fear of 'outsiders' plays a major role in the psyche of the 'authentic citizens' of the city. The Emirati citizens are outnumbered by the 'outsiders' in Dubai. They (Emirati citizens) are the minority in the city. So, maintaining or preserving the Emirati heritage is a

<sup>19</sup> Julian Bolleter, "Charting the Potential of Landscape Urbanism in Dubai", *Landscape Research* 40, 5(2015): 621-642, 629-623.

<sup>20</sup> ILO (International Labour Organisation).Link:<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> ILO (International Labour Organisation).Link:<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf>

great concern for both the authority and the citizens of UAE as well as Dubai. The Emirati authority asserts a very flipping definition of authenticity and belongingness. Both the authority and the permanent citizens of the country emphasize this authenticity to justify the privileged status quo of the permanent citizens. So, the 'authenticity of citizen' is a crucial issue in the entire country. The authenticity of Emirati national identity is defined in terms of citizenship in Dubai.<sup>23</sup> Citizenship is again "premised on shared ancestry, kinship and descent among those who are in possession of Emirati passports: Bedouin, tribal and Arab."<sup>24</sup> According to Akinci the authority has created this narrative of 'authenticity' to assert the popular belief that the migration is a recent post-oil phenomenon, and before the migration, it was a 'homogeneous nation'.<sup>25</sup> Emphasizing on the narrative of 'authentic citizens' the authority has successfully created the 'other'. The narrative of 'other' is visible in every aspect of political, economic, cultural, social and even infrastructural spectrum. There are different layers and conditions of making the 'other' in the city. In this context, Akbar S. Ahmed wrote about the Pakistani experience in Dubai. Unlike Indians, Pakistanis do not belong to a different religion. So for the Pakistanis living in Dubai ethnicity is the main determining factor. He wrote, "[a]s Islam is not the issue – both groups being Muslims of the same sect, Sunni – ethnicity becomes important in definitions within and between the groups. This is further exacerbated by the employer-employee nature of the relationship."<sup>26</sup>

Like some other parts of the Gulf region, the citizens of Dubai proudly wear their national dress '*Disdasha*' (men's dress) and '*Abaya*' (women's dress). Idil Akinci pointed out, "these 'national dress' is a recent 'invention'. Scholars argue that Gulf national

<sup>23</sup> Idil Akinci, "Culture in the 'politics of identity': conceptions of national identity and citizenship among second generation non-Gulf Arab migrants in Dubai", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, 11 (2019): 1-17, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, "Dubai chalo: Problems in the ethnic encounter between Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim societies", *Asian Affairs* 15, 3(1984): 262-276.

dress, which derived from the *Najdi* (i.e. Bedouin) culture, is one of the main 'invented traditions' of the newly established Gulf States and plays an important role in the construction and maintenance of an imagined community based on an Arab and Bedouin heritage."<sup>27</sup>

The UAE authority collected a selective part of the past and 're-engineered' it for fulfilling the current political and economic aspects. They carefully selected the 'orientalist' narrative about their past. They project a 'romanticized' version of the orientalist narrative about their identity to create an 'imagined community' and the category of an 'other'. Akinchi further added, "Performing national identity through everyday acts and embodiment of national symbols, such as national dress, by individuals is crucial in the way boundaries of national identity demarcated and its insiders/ outsiders are evaluated."<sup>28</sup>

These national dresses are exclusively used by the Emirati citizen and by some other Arabs. It provides the 'visibility' of the 'imagined community'. It also facilitates the authority and the 'imagined community members' to distinguish 'the other'. The 'national dress' is a powerful statement against the 'feeling of belongingness' of the 'outsiders'. It makes them aware of their 'otherness'. It says that they are not belonging to that particular politically defined space or territory. The psychological impact of visibility is very strong. Boundaries and borders are crafted and maintained very efficiently in different spectrums of the city. This cultural and political production of the city underlines a conscious effort of depriving the 'other' of the 'feeling of belongingness'.

The education system of Dubai and the involvement of Indians in that education system says a lot about the feeling of 'belongingness' of Indians in the city as well as other parts of the Gulf region. Indians are one of the prominent consumers of the education system in

<sup>27</sup> Idil Akinci, "Culture in the 'politics of identity': conceptions of national identity and citizenship among second generation non-Gulf Arab migrants in Dubai", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, 11 (2019): 1-17.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 2.

Dubai. Many schools in Dubai offer Indian curriculum and many Indians are education entrepreneurs in Dubai. A major section of the Indians prefers Indian curriculum in Dubai for their children. According to them, it would be good for them when they need to go back to India.<sup>29</sup> This particular phenomenon clearly shows the insecurity of the Indians living in Dubai—their consciousness of political vulnerability.

However, the wealthy Indians living in Dubai often express a different feeling regarding the belongingness. Economic comfort provides them with a sense of security in the city. This sense of security is strong enough to temporarily forget about political and cultural vulnerability. David Sancho wrote about the experience of wealthy Indians in Dubai:

...their access to wealthy relatives, friends, and other cultural and social resources; and the abundance of Indian media (digital, radio, newspapers, and TV channels) and daily flights connecting the UAE and India produced a sense that Indians and Indian culture were a constitutive element of Dubai, and that Dubai is a part of India. For many of them, in fact, the boundaries between India and Dubai would often times become blurred.<sup>30</sup>

According to him for many wealthy Indians, Dubai is just an 'extended part' of India. The accessibility of family and cultural elements makes it possible to feel 'a superficial sense of belongingness' despite the political unacceptability. The consumerist culture of the city is so strong that it dominates other aspects of human experience. David pointed out, "[t]hrough consumption migrants are able to achieve an image of themselves as belonging and being part of the Gulf even though they cannot belong as formal citizens."<sup>31</sup>

For many Indians living in the city "Dubai was in many ways

<sup>29</sup> David Sancho, "Exposed to Dubai: education and belonging among young Indian residents in the Gulf", *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 18, 3(2020): 277-289.

<sup>30</sup> David Sancho, "Exposed to Dubai: education and belonging among young Indian residents in the Gulf", *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 18, 3(2020): 277-289.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

very Indian.”<sup>32</sup> Most of them live in very close circles of the same ethnicity. Their day to day interaction is limited to their fellow countryman. This closed environment often helps them to forget about their home country. However, the pandemic was a reminder of the existing vulnerability even for the wealthy class of the city. The pandemic instantly triggered the insecurities forgotten in the midst of the ultra-consumerist culture of Dubai. The insecurities even increased the community feeling among Indians from the different class spectrum. Many workers were living on the street and dependent on the food provided by the Indian community groups during the pandemic and lockdown period.<sup>33</sup>

The community-based institutions are very common in Dubai. These community-based institutions are helpful for the members of the community. It provides them with a feeling of ‘security’ in the land where they don’t ‘belong’. Elsheshtawy pointed out that different community in the city “maintain strict segregatory measures, by having their own set of institutions which enable them to maintain their cultural values.”<sup>34</sup> This arrangement also helps the authority to maintain the segregation among the different ethnic groups. The visible cultural distinctness not only enables to maintain the difference among the community but also to be comfortable about it.

### **Fear, Inside-Out**

Fear is an internal feeling caused by some external entity. Yi-Fu Tuan discussed the ‘landscape’ as the external entity for causing fear. He elaborately discussed the ‘city landscape’ as the source of fear in his book *Landscapes of Fear*. According to Tuan, human being imagined

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Devaki Vadakepat Menon & Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, “Migration and reverse migration: Gulf-Malayalees’ perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic”, *South Asian Diaspora*, (2020): 1-21 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1820668>

<sup>34</sup> Yasser Elsheshtawy, “Redrawing boundaries: Dubai, an emerging global city” In Yasser Elsheshtawy (ed.), *Planning Middle Eastern cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 169-198.

heaven as an epitome of order and earth as chaos; so by imposing order everywhere in the city human being try to imitate heaven.<sup>35</sup> Force is necessary to maintain the 'orderly' structure of the city and 'outsiders' are often considered as a threat to the orderly structure of the city. Tuan said:

...perfect physical and social order rarely lasted anywhere more than a few decades. Its existence depended on force – the stringent application of rules to regulate human behavior. The use of force, however, was ineffective. Too much of it killed the life of the city and reduced it to a mere ceremonial center of splendid monuments. Too little, and a capital would continue to attract swarms of people engaged in economic and commercial activities, whose presence inevitably disrupted the idealized order.<sup>36</sup>

This idea of Tuan can explain the current scenario of Dubai. The authority of the city is too much concerned about the 'orderly' functioning of the city. They are also much concerned about promoting the 'orderly' aspect of 'their territory'. The architectures, monument, shopping malls, and skyscrapers are a proud display of the 'heavenly order' of the city. However, the flow of economic labourers is a visible 'threat' for the orderly structure of Dubai – both for the authority and the citizens.

They (foreign workers) are considered as a 'threat' to their privileged 'orderly' structure. This 'fear' towards outsiders is clearly visible in the state's rules and regulations. They are very much concern about maintaining 'otherness'. The multiculturalism is tolerable under strict rule and surveillance, but assimilation of the 'outsider' is forbidden for maintaining the orderly structure of the city. So, the feeling of belongingness is also prohibited for the 'outsiders' living in the city.

Even the city infrastructure can cause 'fear'. According to Tuan its effect can be 'frightening'.<sup>37</sup> He wrote, "...every street and

<sup>35</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscape of Fear*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1979), 145.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscape of Fear*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1979),

building—and indeed all the bricks and stone blocks in them—are clearly the products of planning and thought, the final result may be a vast, disorderly labyrinth.”<sup>38</sup>

The city authority considers the labourers and all the immigrants as a ‘threat’ and even the infrastructure of the city are frightening. So, in such a situation a sudden outbreak of pandemic and lockdown is capable of creating a horrific experience in the mass level among the workers.

Dubai is a highly segregated city on the basis of class, race and ethnicity. Artificial homogeneity is created within the city just to attract a certain class. The city has created multiple ‘gates’ to segregate different sections. LaavanyaKathiravelu, in her book ‘Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City’ mentioned about the ‘gated communities’ of Dubai. She wrote:

The middle-class gated enclaves and working-class labour camps of Dubai are obviously different spaces. One caters to a skilled expatriate population who demand standards of comfort, privacy and living found in high-income Western states. The other is typically relegated to the edges of the city, and houses the masses of cheap workers who build, clean and service the booming emirate. The gates in the former are primarily to keep undesirables out. In the latter, they keep workers in.<sup>39</sup>

The segregation is clear and unapologetic in the everyday life of the city. However, the segregation is not always visible; because, most of the spatial studies about the city are top-down studies, and are not that of everyday experience.<sup>40</sup> Most of the studies of ‘spaces in

146.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Laavanya Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 134.

<sup>40</sup> Mattias Junemo, “‘Let’s build a palm island!’: playfulness in complex times”, In Mimi Sheller and John Urry(eds.) *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play*, (London: Routledge, 2004) 181-191.

Dubai' are 'macro scale and top-down analyses'.<sup>41</sup> The macro-level top-down analysis or architectural perspective of space dominates, since "much of the emirate's global visibility has been linked with the rapid change in its skyline and cityscape in the last decade."<sup>42</sup> However, the study of everyday life and experience explores some other dimensions of the city. Exclusion is a part of everyday spatial experience in Dubai.

The middle and upper class 'gated' residential areas were created to keep them safe from the threat of 'other'. The 'other' – poor 'non-white' and 'non-Arab' working class are also 'gated' in certain ghettos. Their "movement in and out is monitored by a guard at the gate, and logged in a register."<sup>43</sup>

Fear for the 'other' is the primary concern of the 'gated communities'. In the post-modern narrative, multi-ethnic city aspires to be inclusive, but 'gated' development only promotes 'fear' for the 'other'.<sup>44</sup> However, the 'gated' development or 'safety' of the city is normalized in Dubai and it is often 'marketed' as a desirable 'element'. Kathiravelu explained, "Enclaved living is perceived as normal or right within particular social milieux, part of the middle-class migrant habitus. In taking privatized segregation to be the norm, strategies of disaffiliation and exclusion are seen to be "natural" elements of the urban landscape and city life."<sup>45</sup>

Dubai has created 'gated safe space' for rich white homogeneous ethnic groups segregating them from the 'other'. The 'other' is predominantly South Asian labourers. The rich white 'gated space' is an aspiration for middle-class South Asians. The 'gates' plays a major role in creating the 'other'. It symbolizes the 'alienation' of the

<sup>41</sup> Laavanya Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 135.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>44</sup> Teresa P. R. Caldeira, "Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation", In James Holston (ed.) *Cities and Citizenship* (London: Duke University, 1999), 303-328.

<sup>45</sup> Laavanya Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 143.

other. Even in the 'gated safe space', the feeling of belongingness is rare, but a sense of fear and loneliness is prominent. Belongingness comes from a community feeling, but "in the gated enclaves, social networks around neighbourliness are not easily formed, and friendships are more made often along lines of nationality and language."<sup>46</sup>

The 'culture of fear' exists in Dubai, but by creating 'gates' and forcing 'exclusivity' they have created a 'visibly desirable' 'safe space'. The 'safe space' is desirable for the people and they can afford it by spending money. As Kathiravelu observed:

...in Dubai it (culture of fear) manifests more as a cultural fear of the classed "Other", invading and disrupting the order and aesthetics of middle-class spaces. Safety and security are thus more performed than enforced with any rigidity in gated developments in Dubai. It is the semblance of exclusivity and safety that exists.<sup>47</sup>

So, according to Kathiravelu, 'performance of security' in Dubai 'can be seen as part of the larger construction of exclusivity and class'.<sup>48</sup> The exclusion of the working labour class is so important for the city that they (labourers) are forced to be invisible. They are a threat to the 'aesthetic norms' of Dubai. So they are forced to occupy the hidden spaces of the city.<sup>49</sup> Kathiravelu mentioned, "[g]aining access into labour camps in Dubai is difficult, as most of them are behind walls or barbed-wire fences and have a security guard at the door determining who enters and exits."<sup>50</sup> Most of the labour camps are located outside the 'developed' areas of the city and they are not even visible from the highways.<sup>51</sup> The culture of fear and segregation already existed in the city before the pandemic. The characteristic of post-pandemic world is still unpredictable, but the 'pandemic

<sup>46</sup> Laavanya Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai: Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 146.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

experience' might be a justification for promoting and normalizing the culture of fear and segregation in different spectrum of city life in near future.

## The Pandemic

During the pandemic, the fate of the migrant labourers was highlighted in different media reports and commentaries. Many workers within the country started their 'homecoming' journey from different cities on foot. This was an embarrassment for the government and the country. The same fate was faced by migrant workers abroad. However, in the initial phase—the 'limited and selective' evacuation of the migrant workers by the government from different countries was covered by the media in a 'heroic' way. India started *Vande Bharat* Mission to bring back its citizens to its home country.<sup>52</sup> The initiative of the government was appreciated. However, with the increase in the number of Covid-19 patients, people started to criticize the initiative. Many people pointed out that the inflow of NRIs is one of the reasons for the increasing number of infection.<sup>53</sup>

The sufferings of the migrant workers in the Middle Eastern countries were not visible like the sufferings of the workers of domestic cities. The mental sufferings and insecurities of the workers working abroad were ignored in the chaos of the home state. Many Indians working abroad did not get their salary and lost their job.<sup>54</sup> *The Hindu* published a report about the workers in the Gulf region. According to the report many workers from the region had to return without months of salary owed to them.<sup>55</sup> The report

<sup>52</sup> Arabinda Acharya, "COVID-19: A Testing Time for UAE-India Relations? A Perspective from Abu Dhabi", *Strategic Analysis* 44, 3(2020): 259-268.

<sup>53</sup> Devaki Vadakepat Menon & Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, "Migration and reverse migration: Gulf-Malayalees' perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic", *South Asian Diaspora*, (2020): 1-21 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1820668>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Rejimon Kuttappan, "Indian migrant workers in Gulf countries are returning home without months of salary owed to them", *The Hindu*, New Delhi, 19 September 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/society/indian-migrant-workers->

mentioned it as “wage theft—non-payment for overtime, denying workers their last pay check after he or she leaves a job, not paying for all of the hours worked, not paying minimum wages—is a trend that often goes unreported.”<sup>56</sup> A BBC report also mentioned about the pathetic condition of the Indian workers in Dubai.<sup>57</sup> According to the report, the workers did not get their salary for the ongoing pandemic and they were facing problem to afford shelter and food. They were completely dependent on charity organizations. Some of them did not even have enough money to afford a return ticket and quarantine facilities. They were in a vulnerable situation in foreign countries. The following statement explains the situation of Indians workers in UAE and Dubai: “Indian expats currently find themselves in a no-man’s land with the virus keeping them at bay in the United Arab Emirates. As an ordeal to NRIs and other residents, the spread of Covid-19 has compelled preparation for an unforeseen shift from a globalized to localised lifestyle...”<sup>58</sup>

The workers were in a helpless situation.<sup>59</sup> So, they desperately wanted to come back to India. Menon and Vadakepat called the process as ‘reversed migration’.<sup>60</sup> However, the ‘reverse migration’ is not appreciable for the home country. The post-pandemic situation is a serious issue of concern in India in the context of the workers working in Dubai and other parts of the Gulf region. The economy of Dubai is not dependent on oil anymore and its retail, tourism and real estate sector suffered the most because of Covid-19 situation.<sup>61</sup> So, the economic impact of the city will be

in-gulf-countries-are-returning-home-without-months-of-salary-owed-to-them/  
article32639165.ece

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Sameer Hashmi, “Coronavirus leaves Gulf migrant workers stranded”, *BBC News*, Dubai, 15 May 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52655131>

<sup>58</sup> Devaki Vadakepat Menon & Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, “Migration and reverse migration: Gulf-Malayalees’ perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic”, *South Asian Diaspora*, (2020): 1-21 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1820668>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

severe. According to the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, 70 per cent of business in UAE will be closed because of the worldwide lockdowns.<sup>62</sup> So, around 150,000 Indians were preparing to leave the country.<sup>63</sup> The negative growth rate and focus on 'Emiratisation' is already predicted by many sources.<sup>64</sup> According to a study, more than 80 per cent of workers were talking about their preparation to leave the country.<sup>65</sup> The study also mentioned the 'Emiratisation' process of the country. This process will further reduce the demand for Indian workers in Dubai. Many parts of the Gulf region have already started planning to reduce the dependency on foreign workers.<sup>66</sup> The pandemic situation will further encourage them to do so. For example, Kuwait's National Assembly approved a draft bill in July 2020 to reduce the number of foreign workers. It will affect India. The bill will allow evicting 'between 800,000 and 1.45 million workers'.<sup>67</sup> It's a catastrophe. India was already going through a lot of economic issues before the starting of the pandemic, and according to the World Bank '12 million Indians could be driven into destitution by coronavirus'.<sup>68</sup> Indian migrant workers helped the economy of both the host country and home country.<sup>69</sup> Asian Development Bank predicted that the remittances could fall up to 23.5 per cent for India in 2020.<sup>70</sup> Apart from the state authority's concern, the workers are also anxious about their 'future'. The economic aspect was not the only concern of the migrants working abroad. The 'NRI status' helped them to gain "some personal values

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Rupert Stone, "COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst", *Asian Affairs* 51, 3(2020):542-568.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Devaki Vadakepat Menon & Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, "Migration and reverse migration: Gulf-Malayalees' perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic", *South Asian Diaspora*, (2020): 1-21<https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1820668>

<sup>70</sup> Rupert Stone, "COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst", *Asian Affairs* 51, 3(2020): 542-568.

such as self-esteem, achievements, and recognition in their family and society.”<sup>71</sup> According to estimation, 1 in 7 Indians affected by mental disorder in 2017, and the situation will be worst during the pandemic because of the mental stress and economic uncertainty.<sup>72</sup>

The workers were panicked ‘outside’ the country; however, ‘inside’ the country – the surrounding is not again supportive. The context of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ space has changed in the pandemic time. TejaswiniNiranjana wrote:

In the space-time of our collective modernity, dating back over two hundred years, we had come to define the “outside” as the space of individual freedom, mobility and recognition. In pandemic time, the outside becomes the space of threat, so we now exist in the outside by smalling up, masking, flinching, shrinking. The “inside,” for those living alone or with just one other person, and those privileged by class, has been a space of safety and comfort in these perilous months...<sup>73</sup>

The transnational migrant workers were exposed in an ‘outside’ space. They were not ‘inside’ the home country. The psychological trauma caused by the ‘inside-outside’ narrative was widespread. In the initial phase of pandemic, many Pakistani students in China posted videos on social media platform requesting the Government to bring them back to Pakistan. Instead of their repeated appeal, the Pakistani Government made it clear that the students would remain safe in China – as Pakistan lacks proper medical facilities. Not only Pakistan but the whole South Asian region, including India, has been vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. After Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia is the second poorest region in the world.<sup>74</sup> The

<sup>71</sup> Devaki Vadakepat Menon & Vanaja Menon Vadakepat, “Migration and reverse migration: Gulf-Malayalees’ perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic”, *South Asian Diaspora*, (2020): 1-21<https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1820668>

<sup>72</sup> Rupert Stone, “COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst”, *Asian Affairs* 51, 3(2020): 542-568.

<sup>73</sup> Tejaswini, Niranjana, “Pandemic musings in inter-Asia”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, 3 (2020): 476-481.

<sup>74</sup> Rupert Stone, “COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst”, *Asian Affairs* 51,

whole South Asia region has a very weak healthcare system and India spends only 3.53 per cent of its GDP on healthcare.<sup>75</sup> The people living outside are quite aware of the vulnerability. But the 'outside' narrative was so powerful that many of them ignored the vulnerability of the homecountry. The insecurities that the workers were carrying in their everyday life made the 'outside' narrative more prominent. The pandemic situation was a mirror that shows the deficiencies of the country.<sup>76</sup> This mirror also reflects the 'inside' insecurities, vulnerabilities and fear of the workers working in cities like Dubai. They were never belonging to that city, and they carried the fear somewhere inside their 'heart' all the timewhile being 'outside' the country.

## Conclusion

The 'Dubai model' of modern cityscape is visually seductive; and the 'voyeurism' often dilutes the attention from some primary aspects of city narrative- like, human experience and emotions of belongingness or fear in the everyday life of the city. The Indian workers are deprived of the 'feeling of belongingness' for generations in the city where they live. The host country and the home country are normalizing it for their economic purposes. The city has also nourished and normalized a 'culture of fear' for each other (between 'locals' and the 'other') over the years. The Covid-19 pandemic suddenly caused a 'collective emotional breakdown' when the workers tried to open up for a moment. However, the chaos of the home country and the management of 'orderly city' made their voices insignificant. The pandemic has suddenly exposed multiple evidences of human sufferings in different layers. The emotional status of workers in foreign cities like Dubai is one of them. A closer and empathic approach is necessary towards this

3(2020): 542-568.

<sup>75</sup> Rupert Stone, "COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst", *Asian Affairs* 51, 3(2020): 542-568.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

aspect of migrant workers before the evidences are getting blurred in the midst of post-pandemic 'economic priorities'. An 'iceberg' should not be ignored before moving towards the 'futuristic journey' of a city or a country.